


Henry Moore



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Art & Idea

HENRY MOORE

Essay by Herbert Read

Philadelphia College of Art

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"Art and Idea: Henry Moore" is presented as part of the continuing exhibition program at the Philadelphia College of Art. The primary purpose of this program is instructional. It affords the students enrolled in the various departments of the College an experience which may contribute in important ways to their development as artists. If in addition, the exhibition serves a larger public interested in the artist and the arts of today, we are twice rewarded.

This exhibition of the work of Henry Moore was organized by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Washington, D.C. Its presentation at the College has been the responsibility of Dennis Leon, Acting Director of the Fine Arts Department and Richard Hood, Design Coordinator of Exhibitions. The College acknowledges with gratitude the generosity of Philadelphia collectors, listed in the catalog. George D. Culler, President

Herbert Read—the Art of Henry Moore

The purpose of this exhibition is didactic. It is designed to explain how a great artist works, how he uses his mind and imagination to achieve particular results that are not only works of art in a general sense, but also works possessing qualities that are peculiar to this particular artist. Henry Moore has very kindly agreed to make available the necessary documents, which are very plentiful in his case. Because he is a representative modern artist, therefore the way he works helps to explain the art of our time in a general sense.

Certain qualities in an artist must be taken for granted — otherwise he would not be an artist. He must possess visual acuity, a sensibility for form and colour, and an ability to coordinate his sense impressions, so that what he creates corresponds with exactitude to what he feels — all this being what Coleridge called the “shaping spirit of Imagination”. These faculties in an artist are basically a natural endowment, “a gift of nature”, but they must be trained or educated, and this process, too, is taken for granted in the exhibition. What we wish to illustrate or explain is the actual process of creation in an artist fully endowed with sensuous abilities and fully trained in their exercise.

There are, generally speaking, two sources of ideas or inspiration — Henry Moore usually talks about his “ideas for sculpture”. One source is in the external world, the other in the mind of the artist. The philosopher or psychologist may assure us that there is nothing in the mind that was not first outside the mind, but this is a distinction that does not affect our present demonstration.

The traditional artist of the past has usually relied on inspiration from without — on “ideas” derived from his observation of natural objects, of the human body, of effects of light, etc. These phenomena he may study objectively and his aim may be limited to

the direct representation of their natural qualities. In Henry Moore's case such representational aims have been limited to life-studies, to depictions of groups of people (e.g., his famous *Shelter Drawings* done in London during the last war). Such studies or drawings do not occupy an important place in his *oeuvre*, but he has said that from time to time he returns to drawing-from-life for refreshment, for enjoyment, "to keep his eye in", as we say. But too much drawing of this kind is not good for a sculptor. "At one time", he writes, "whenever I made drawings for sculpture I tried to give them as much the illusion of real sculptures as I could — that is, I drew by the method of illusion, of light falling on an object. But now I find that carrying a drawing so far that it becomes a substitute for the sculpture either weakens the desire to do the sculpture, or is likely to make the sculpture only a dead realization of the drawing".

But there is another kind of drawing, another approach to nature, which Henry Moore illustrates better than any other artist, past or present, known to me. This begins with the observation of natural forms, such as bones, shells, pebbles, skeletons of leaves or plants, rock formations — any natural phenomenon formed by the laws of growth or the operation of natural forces (such as erosion). The observation of such objects Moore calls his "form-experience" — it is the experience of universal shapes to which everybody is subconsciously "conditioned" and to which everybody therefore responds more or less automatically ("if their conscious control does not cut them off").

Moore has made hundreds of drawings (usually in coloured crayons) of such universal shapes, and as he draws these shapes he learns how to vary their outline or to combine them into new shapes. Several of these drawings on exhibition will illustrate this evolutionary process.

The knowledge of form thus obtained can then be "applied" — it is like a language that can be used to express all possible "ideas". But ideas are of two kinds, these initial ideas, which are ideas of form, conscious ideas; and then ideas in the more general sense of the word, ideas of the imagination, ideas prompted by the artist's unconscious.

The personality, Moore himself has said, "has two sides and both must play their part". "And I think the first inception of a painting or a sculpture may begin from either end. As far as my own experience is concerned, I sometimes begin a drawing with no preconceived problem to solve, with only the desire to use pencil on paper, and make lines, tones, and shapes with no conscious aim; but as my mind takes in what is so produced, a point arrives where some idea becomes conscious *and crystallizes*, and then *a control and ordering* begin to take place". (My italics.)

On other occasions the artist starts with a set subject; he gives himself "a sculptural problem" in relation to a block of stone of known dimensions; and then his problem is a conscious one — to attempt to build an ordered relationship of forms. His procedure is then like an architect's: the creation of a structure which stone by stone, stage by stage, carries out the preconceived plan. But, as Moore himself admits, in the case of the sculptor "unexplainable jumps in the process of thought occur; and the imagination plays its part".

What, in this context, does Moore, or any artist, mean by the imagination? Though he rarely relies on any psychological theory (in Moore's case *never* — he has no first-hand knowledge of modern psychology), I believe that every typical modern artist relies on the hypothesis of the unconscious (which we now associate with the name of Freud, though as Freud himself admitted, it was the invention of the Romantic poets and philosophers). This hypothesis assumes the existence of a mind or psyche of several more or less determinate levels. The deepest level is almost inaccessible, but there is a superficial level, the preconscious, that frequently emerges in dreams and day dreams, and even in more or less automatic activities like writing, painting or carving (the rhythmical action of pen or brush or chisel "releases" the images that lie ready to emerge, and which have been deposited there by past, forgotten experiences).

Moore says that he is "very much aware that associational, psychological factors play a large part in sculpture". He suggests that "rounded forms convey an idea of fruitfulness, maturity, probably

because the earth, women's breasts, and most fruits are rounded, and these shapes are important because they have this background in our habits of perception." This observation is true of the pre-conscious only; for the forms that lie deeper in the unconscious there is no explanation in "our habits of perception". We need a further hypothesis, something like Jung's theory of a collective unconscious. In any case, Moore's most characteristic and most impressive work takes the form of those archetypal motives, such as the Mother and Child, the Reclining Figure, External and Internal Forms, whose powerful effect derives from some supra-personal or universal significance. Moore's obsession with two or three such motives is not to be explained in associational terms; the prompting comes, not from the observation of natural forms (though these play their part in the shaping of the symbolic form) but, to quote Coleridge again, from "the passion and the life, whose fountains are within". Those fountains, which spring, as Coleridge implies, from the deepest levels of our physical and psychological nature, are the source of the power and fascination of Moore's greatest works.

Those "greatest works" cannot, for practical reasons, be included in the present exhibition, but examples of them are to be seen in many American museums. But this exhibition has been conceived in the hope that it will explain how these great works came into being. Monumentality apart (and monumentality is a rare achievement in sculpture) there is no essential difference between any of the smaller works exhibited and any of the greater works to be seen elsewhere. Some of the pieces are, indeed, the first intuitive grasp of the works that were to be enlarged to monumental scale. The great sculptor is able to conceive his projects in a kind of visual shorthand, and if we learn this shorthand we can derive from the drawing and the model a great part of the aesthetic pleasure that awaits us in the completed project.

Henry Moore on sculpture

1934 Every material has its own individual qualities. It is only when the sculptor works direct, when there is an active relationship with his material, that the material can take its part in the shaping of an idea. Stone, for example, is hard and concentrated and should not be falsified to look like flesh — it should not be forced beyond its constructive build to a point of weakness. It should keep its hard tense stoniness.

1937 (The sculptor) must strive continually to think of, and use, form in its full spatial completeness. He gets the solid shape, as it were, inside his head — he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. He mentally visualizes a complex form from all round itself; he knows while he looks at one side what the other side is like; he identifies himself with its centre of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realizes its volume, as the space that the shape displaces in the air.

1937 Although it is the human figure which interests me most deeply, I have always paid great attention to natural forms, such as bone, shells, and pebbles, etc. Pebbles show nature's way of working stone. Some of the pebbles I pick up have holes right through them.

1941 Mexican sculpture, as soon as I found it, seemed to me true and right, perhaps because I at once hit on similarities in it with some eleventh-century carvings I had seen as a boy on Yorkshire churches. Its 'stoniness', by which I mean its truth to material, its tremendous power without loss of sensitiveness, its astonishing variety and fertility of form-invention and its approach to a full three-dimensional conception of form, makes it unsurpassed in my opinion by any other period of stone sculpture.

1951 When I began to make sculptures thirty years ago, it was very necessary to fight for the doctrine of truth to material (the need for direct carving, for respecting the particular character of each material, and so on). So at that time many of us tended to make a fetish of it. I still think it is important, but it should not be a criterion of the value of a work — otherwise a snowman made by a child would have to be

praised at the expense of Rodin or a Bernini. Rigid adherence to the doctrine results in domination of the sculptor by the material. The sculptor ought to be the master of his material. Only, not a cruel master.

1951 In my opinion, long and intense study of the human figure is the necessary foundation for a sculptor. The human figure is most complex and subtle and difficult to grasp in form and construction, and so it makes the most exacting form for study and comprehension. A moderate ability to 'draw' will pass muster in a landscape or a tree, but even the untrained eye is more critical of the human figure — because it is ourselves.

1951 Sculpture is an art of the open air. Daylight, *sunlight* is necessary to it, and for me its best setting and complement is nature. I would rather have a piece of my sculpture put in a landscape, almost any landscape, than in, or on, the most beautiful building I know.

1953 At one time holes in my sculpture were made for their own sakes. Because I was trying to become conscious of spaces in the sculpture, I made the hole have a shape in its own right, the solid body was encroached upon, eaten into, and sometimes the form was only the shell holding the hole. Recently I have attempted to make the forms and the spaces (not holes) inseparable, neither being more important than the other.

1954 Drapery can emphasize the tension in a figure, for where the form pushes outwards, such as on the shoulders, the thighs, the breasts, etc. it can be pulled tight across the form (almost like a bandage), and by contrast with the crumpled slackness of the drapery which lies between the salient points, the pressure from inside is intensified.

1957 I willingly accept what I try to bring together. In the heads of my *King and Queen* or in the head and body of my *Warrior*, some mixture of degree of realism is implicit. I do not suggest that I have intentionally done it. I did not say: 'Now, I'll make the head different' — it is just that in the head part I could focus, in essence, the intention of the entire figure. A bull-like though docile, a strong though battered, being; suffering — the cleft down the middle of the skull — a resignation but still a defiance. By contrasting the head to the natural









structure of the rest, the whole idea of the figure is pointed out — it is these contrasts which do it.

1961 There is a great deal still to be done with three-dimensional form as a means of expressing what people feel about themselves, and nature, and the world around them. But I don't think that we shall, or should, ever get far away from the thing that all sculpture is based on, in the end: the human body.

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Biographical notes

- 1898 Born in Castleford, Yorkshire.
- 1909 Impressed by carvings in Methley Church, Yorkshire; determined to become a sculptor.
- 1910 Won scholarship from elementary school to Castleford Grammar School, to train to be a teacher.
- 1916 Post as student teacher in old elementary school.
- 1917 Became private in 15th London Regiment (Civil Service Rifles). Was gassed at Battle of Cambrai and invalided back to England. Became physical training instructor.
- 1919 Demobilized and resumed teaching. Went to Leeds School of Art on ex-serviceman's education grant.
- 1921 Went to Royal College of Art, London.
- 1925 Travelling scholarship took him to Paris, Rome, Florence, Venice and Ravenna.
- 1928 First one-man exhibition, Warren Gallery, London. *North Wind* for Underground Building, St. Jame's, London.
- 1931 One-man exhibition at Leicester Galleries, London, and subsequently in 1933, 1936, 1940, 1946, 1951, 1954 and 1955.
- 1936 Made tour of cave paintings in Pyrenees. Visited Madrid, Toledo and Barcelona.
- 1940 Commissioned by War Artists Advisory Committee to make drawings of underground shelter scenes.
- 1941 Coal mine drawings for War Artists Advisory Committee. Retrospective exhibition of sculpture and drawings at Temple Newsam House, Leeds.
- 1943 First one-man exhibition at Bucholz Gallery, New York.
- 1944 *Madonna and Child* for Church of St. Matthew, Northampton.

- 1946 Visited United States. Retrospective exhibition at Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1947–48 Exhibited in State Galleries of Australia.
- 1948 Awarded International Sculpture Prize at 24th Venice Biennale. *Three Standing Figures* exhibited in Open Air Sculpture Exhibition in Battersea Park and presented by Contemporary Art Society to London County Council.
- 1951 *Reclining Figure* for Festival of Britain. Retrospective exhibition of sculpture and drawings at Tate Gallery, London. Retrospective exhibition at Zappeion Gallery, Athens. Visited Greece. Retrospective exhibition of drawings at Albertina, Vienna.
- 1952 Retrospective exhibition of sculpture and drawings at National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town.
- 1952–53 Commissioned to execute *Sculptural Screen* and *Draped Reclining Figure* for Time-Life Building, Bond Street, London.
- 1953 Retrospective exhibition of sculpture and drawings at 2nd Sao Paulo Bienale; awarded International Sculpture Prize.
- 1955 Created Companion of Honour. Commissioned to execute large relief in brick for Bowen Centrum, Rotterdam.
- 1956 Invited to execute sculpture for the forecourt of the UNESCO Headquarters, Paris.
- 1957 Worked on ideas for UNESCO sculpture. Later visited Italy to supervise carving of final figure.
- 1958 *Reclining Figure* 1958 placed in forecourt of UNESCO Headquarters. Awarded Second Sculpture Prize in Pittsburgh Bicentennial International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture.
- 1959 Exhibition of sculpture and drawings (1950–58) at International Art Exhibition, Tokyo; awarded Foreign Minister's prize.
- 1960 Exhibition of sculpture (1950–60) at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.

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THE FAMILY, Bronze, 5" high, Catalog Number 97

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